DAWN

OPINION

Sheikh Hasina verdict

FORMER prime minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, who once ruled Bangladesh with an iron fist, has been sentenced to death for crimes against humanity allegedly committed by her administration during last year's popular revolt in that country. Sheikh Hasina, who has been living in India after fleeing her homeland in August 2024, has termed the verdict "biased" and delivered by a "rigged tribunal". Ironically, the court that convicted her — the International Crimes Tribunal — was set up by Sheikh Hasina herself. During her rule, it sent several of her opponents, mostly from the Bangladesh chapter of Jamaat-i-Islami and the opposition BNP, to the gallows for their supposed role in the 1971 violence. Many people rightly described those trials as unfair. Today, Sheikh Hasina appears to have become a victim of the very institutions she had created to eliminate her opponents.

While the fairness of the trial and the hasty manner in which it was conducted can be questioned, there can be little argument that Sheikh Hasina's dispensation had become increasingly autocratic over the years. Cronies were enriched, while opponents were hounded. Democratic principles were eschewed in favour of a cult of personality surrounding Sheikh Hasina, her father Sheikh Mujeeb and her party the Awami League. Sheikh Hasina's repressive methods culminated in an explosion of popular rage last year, which eventually led to the toppling of her government, and her self-exile in India — a close ally for decades. It is clear that Sheikh Hasina's government unleashed excesses on protesters during the 2024 unrest; she herself admitted that "we lost control of the situation". Earlier this year, her party was banned, while her late father, once revered as 'Bangabandhu', also became a target of the protesters' ire.

Over five decades since East Pakistan became Bangladesh, political stability still eludes that country. Whatever economic progress Bangladesh had made during Sheikh Hasina's rule was overtaken by her repression of dissent, and relentless assaults on the opposition. Today, Bangladesh stands at a crucial juncture. Elections are scheduled for next year, and the interim authorities must ensure that full democratic rule is restored at the earliest. For elections to be credible, the Awami League must be allowed to contest. It should be remembered that the 2024 elections — boycotted by the opposition — that returned Sheikh Hasina to power were not considered fair, which was a major factor behind the downfall of her regime. That is why all political parties must be allowed to contest the next polls to establish the credibility of the process. Those officials guilty of crimes must face justice. But if the process is coloured by vengeance including extreme punishments like the death penalty — which this paper opposes — it will only perpetuate instability. Mature states balance demands for justice with the need for reconciliation.

Forex curbs

THE State Bank's new restrictions on individual dollar purchases appear to be an attempt to manage a market getting jittery about potential foreign exchange rate depreciation. With the trade deficit widening in recent months owing to an uptick in economic growth, people are expecting the exchange rate to slide in the near term. Those with spare cash are trying to get ahead of it by purchasing dollars and other major currencies to hedge potential losses, bringing the exchange rate under pressure. The new regulations are clear: dollars or other major currencies for foreign currency accounts can only be purchased via a bank transfer or cheque. Other requirements for bank account holders stay the same. The real bite will, however, come from the cut in the limit for CNIC-based cash purchases from $900 to $500 per month. That is the change that many fear could give a big boost to the grey market.

The new regulations are also expected to alter the competitive landscape of Pakistan's foreign currency exchange market. Foreign currency bought from an independent exchange company will be issued in the form of a cheque for deposit as money changers are not permitted to hold dollars in bank accounts, and thus, cannot make account-to-account transfers. Clearance of cheques takes five days in the case of dollars and up to 20 for euros and pounds. Bank-owned exchanges face no such handicap. A foreign currency account at a bank that also owns an exchange company means an instant transfer. Independent money changers complain that these rules favour bank-owned forex outlets. That said, the changed rules will make it harder for ordinary people, with or without a foreign currency account, to access dollars when they actually need them. While account holders face long delays between payment and receiving their purchases, those relying on cash purchases will now have their allowance slashed, making it harder for families to send remittances to cover emergency expenses abroad. While it is important to clamp down on cash and illicit outflows, it is equally crucial to ensure ease for legitimate needs. The ostensible purpose of the new regulations is to promote a cashless economy, and stem outflows in illegal crypto currency investments. Only time will tell if the State Bank will succeed in this endeavour.

Match manners

HANDSHAKES and sportsmanship stole the show in neutral Sri Lanka at the first blind women's T20 tournament. In a heartwarming moment, the visually challenged India and Pakistan teams shook hands, as they honoured the spirit of cricket. Unlike their national squads — male and female — the Indian team in Sri Lanka demonstrated sporting vision. The players of the two sides shared a bus, exchanged pleasantries, and the Pakistanis congratulated the Indian players on their victory. Lately, cricketing rituals — pre-toss protocols, words of encouragement, and line-up discussions — have become a casualty of politics, particularly India's radical nationalism. Despite the May conflict, Pakistan has been willing to play against India according to the International Cricket Council's schedules, upholding the tradition of not mixing sports with politics.

Sadly, India has deviated from the practice. From its insistence on neutral venues, refusal to play a group game during the World Championship of Legends, lack of etiquette and the Asia Cup trophy drama to the Indian women team's insolence, the country has weaponised the sport. Cricket has served as a bridge in the most oppressive of times. Matches, seen as 'cricket diplomacy', went on during the Zia and Musharraf regimes. Former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in attendance to thaw ties. But PM Narendra Modi's government has used the game to demonise Pakistan. Yet, images from the blind women's T20 contest sent a message: those with few opportunities know the value of camaraderie, respect and optimism. India has indulged in burning bridges for political gains for far too long. The Asia Cup demonstrated how far Indian cricket has shifted from its past position: sport promotes solidarity in society and between nations. The country must take a cue from these young women. Sports is a safety valve. It makes space for dialogue, trust and hope. The people of the two countries deserve jovial tournaments. Their love for cricket should not be exploited.

BY ARIFA NOOR

State and its pillars

There is little hope that any of the three pillars of the state are intact.

NOW that the 27th Amendment has been passed, some in the legal profession and others are mourning the new subservience of the judiciary, going as far as to say that the third pillar of government has come crashing down.

Of course, what is less mourned, perhaps, is that the second pillar, parliament, is no longer standing upright either. Having been weakened over the years, it no longer functions as an independent branch either. It sits, stands and runs around in circles on cue — from the leadership of the political parties and the known unknowns. There were hints of it during the passage of the 18th Amendment but the slide began in earnest later — from the lightening-fast approval given to Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa's extension to the present when constitutional amendments are passed within days. The 'public representatives' are led by the Pied Piper to the 'ayes' gallery when the vote is needed and there is little choice in the matter. And it doesn't matter if they are sitting on the treasury benches or are in the opposition.

The executive may have had its hand strengthened by the recent legislation, but simply on paper. But its ability to make decisions is now a thing of the past. The only reason it is perhaps not discussed much is that its helplessness is hidden behind closed doors. In private rooms, it is hard to say who is chairing meetings or making the decisions. The capitulation is just not as public as in the case of the legislature even though the results are visible to all.

Indeed, there is little hope that any of the three pillars of the state are intact.

But in the land of the pure, political theories remain just that — theories. Here, the pillars of the state weaken and crumble, straining just to stay upright but in our everyday lingo, the word 'state' is used to denote our respect and our acknowledgement of the power and influence of one institution. At times, we use the word also to concede our own vulnerability. But that is another story.

The state hasn't been left untouched either. The 27th Amendment has brought sweeping reforms to the structure of the armed forces as well. Among other things, the new legislation has discontinued the joint chief position and introduced a new CDF, a position which will be held by the chief of army staff, who now appears to be far more than the 'first among equals'. At the same time, the tenure of all services chiefs has been increased from three to five years. The head — COAS/CDF — has also been given lifetime immunity, like the president.

It is being said this will help prepare the armed forces for modern warfare and allow for the kind of coordination that was perhaps not possible earlier. Time and again, those who claim to understand how warfare works argue this, but their language explains little to those of us not in the know. These new changes will bring or improve combat readiness, synergy, multi-domain integration — though what this means in practical terms remains unclear to those of us who have never worn a uniform.

It is easier, however, to understand the far simpler concerns or worries that are being put forward.

There are fears that these changes may allow for centralisation of power in a single post/individual that is also above the law. Of course, some can argue that strong men who claimed to speak for or on behalf of the state were always above the law — the trial of Musharraf is a case in point — but now this has been put down on paper. But in a country such as Pakistan where checks on the ruling elite have always remained weak, the precedent being set by offering immunity to any government official is worrying. Others will want to follow suit in the future, as it will encourage decision-making without any fear of accountability.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, questions have been raised about what this will mean for the other two forces and their ability to make decisions or have their views heard if the perception of equality between all three forces is not acknowledged on paper. This, it is feared, will impact not just the morale but also decision-making.

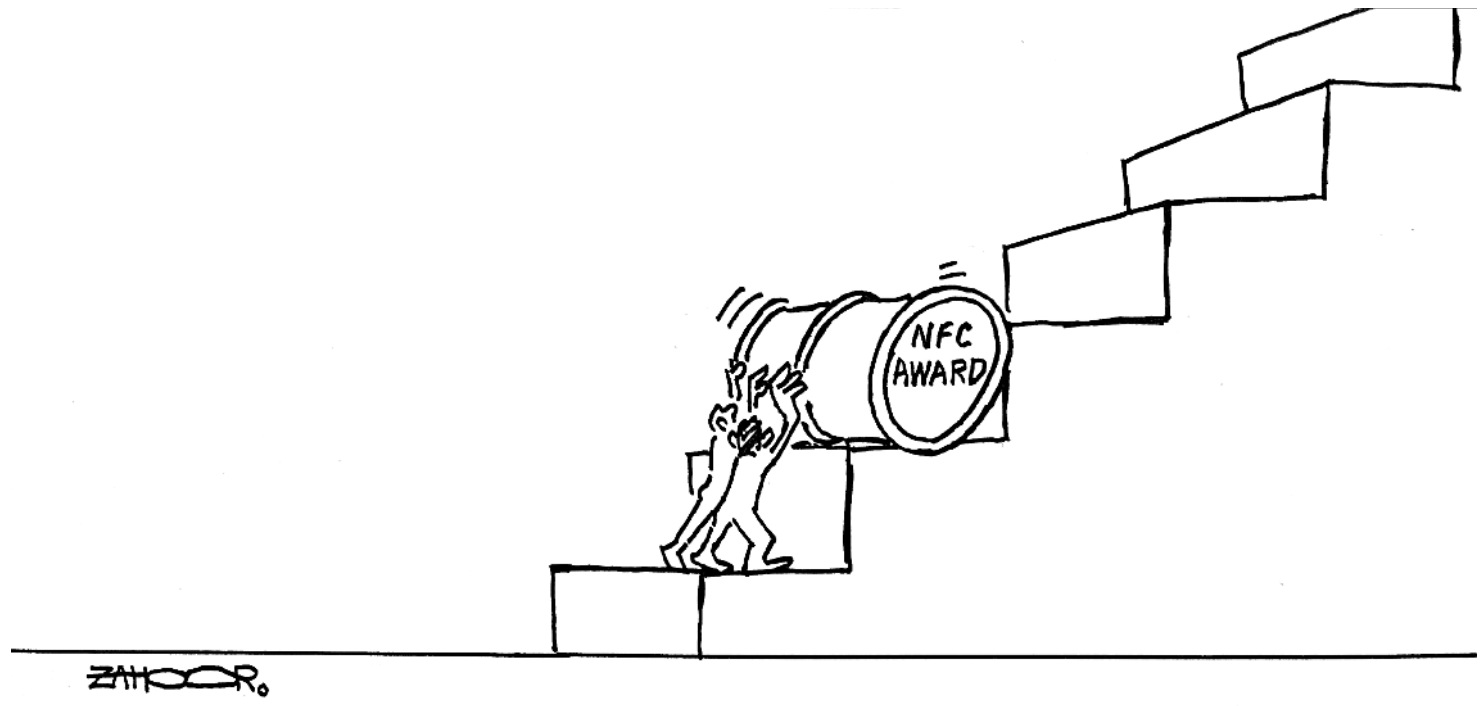
How will it impact decisions about resource allocation, or decisions taken during times of conflict? Will the other services chiefs still be able to make their voice heard, ask some? Here, some insiders have mentioned the 2019 skirmish with India where they claim the then chief of army staff was outvoted when deciding the response to India. This account has been questioned, but as an anecdote it does urge more clarity on how decisions will be made. Will collegial decision-making, which some say has been at work till now, continue once the new structures are in place?

These questions are being asked partly because there is no transparent debate on the changes. If the discussions were open, such questions would not fester.

But beyond the powers, in Pakistan, there is always the worry about how the politics of any changes will play out. A case in point is the frenzied politicking over key non-political appointments as we have seen in the recent past. And one wonders that if powers are further centralised in new positions, whether it will encourage newcomers and aspirants to lobby in new and more aggressive ways for key positions as well as exceptional promotions. The long-term impact of this will not just weaken civilian actors and institutions; this is not one-way traffic.

In a fast-fragmenting state and society where legislation is being used to hollow out institutions such as the judiciary, any new factors that can further add to centralisation of power and increased politicking should worry us all — till some solid answers are provided. ■

The writer is a journalist.



BY JAWED NAQVI

Opposition has homework to do

LESSONS from the Bihar elections have domestic implications, and they will be studied in the neighbourhood. The call to war Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave from the poll-bound state in April in response to terror killings in distant Pahalgam, was seen as aimed at producing a favourable electoral outcome in last week's poll verdict. In case the war cry, followed by a four-day flare-up with Pakistan, did help in the stupendous verdict, would the victory for Modi's ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Bihar fuel more tensions on the border or would they abate now that the run-in with Pakistan had served its electoral purpose. Or would success in Bihar prompt repetition in crucial West Bengal polls next year?

The narrative from Modi supporters and his rivals is that one or two previous military events did help the prime minister electorally. It is claimed that the Pulwama attack and the aerial skirmish it set off with Pakistan brought rich dividends for Modi in the 2019 elections. Never mind the dubious optics the skirmishes produced to contradict the belief — an Indian pilot's embarrassing capture in Pakistan in the post-Pulwama episode and widespread claims, not least by President Donald Trump, of Pakistan shooting down several Indian planes in the subsequent Operation Sindoor/Bunyanum Marsoos engagement. The optics were air-brushed or recast by pliable TV channels as major victories. Dampening the enthusiasm for war cries and their electoral linkages is the example of Manmohan Singh. He won a second term while not raising a militarist finger in the aftermath of the Mumbai carnage of November 2008. On the contrary, he changed his home minister and probed peaceful ways to resolve the terror problem with Pakistan. Singh agreed to discuss Balochistan alongside the Kashmir issue in his meeting with his Pakistani counterpart in Egypt. The proposal was shot down by the deep state on both sides.

Be that as it may, the opposition in India is crying foul at the Bihar results. The Congress looks scandalised by "the unprecedented 90 per cent strike rate" scored by the BJP and its allies, a reference to the number of seats won against the number of seats contested by the NDA. It says former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi won 404 of the 514 seats the Congress contested for the Lok Sabha after his mother's assassination in October 1984. But even he didn't get the strike rate of last week's Bihar results for the NDA. The implication is that there was foul play at the hustings.

There are two problems here that the opposition should tackle. If the election results were an outcome of rigging, as is alleged, it is not all bad news. It shows India at least doesn't face a threat from fascism given that fascism rides popular support, which the BJP needs to scrounge around for. As for military action on the other hand, if it begins to tweak electoral results, a militarised polity could easily become fertile ground for Hindutva to strike deeper roots. In either case, what is the opposition's strategy to take on the entrenched right wing under Modi's watch.

> India's opposition parties might want to figure out their priorities at the outset.

Rahul Gandhi and his team have carried out deep investigations into some serious electoral malpractices in vogue under the Modi regime. The election commission has been accused of connivance. The probe threw up compelling findings, a classic one being the case of Brazilian hairdresser Larissa Nery, whose photos featured in voters' lists across India. Having done the homework in a higher cause, Gandhi's party promptly sullied its image by haggling over seat shares with the local ally. It hurt both.

Bereft of context, the result looks unremarkable. Bihar's main opposition party, Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal, pouched the highest percentage of vote share but only to win a paltry 25 seats in the 243-member assembly. With 23pc of the total votes cast, the RJD is clearly but strangely ahead of Modi's ally, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United, JDU) with 19.25pc.

The BJP got 20.08pc vote share. Yet, the BJP and JDU won 89 and 85 seats respectively. Likewise, the All India Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen with 1.85pc vote share took five seats while the Congress with 8.71pc managed to get just six.

Such anomalies were at play with the left's performance too and has been the feature of many an Indian election, a commentary on the country's first past the post system. Indira Gandhi was 'routed' in 1977 by the Janata Party with a difference of 2pc votes. She took 40.98pc, and the opposition alliance had nothing more than 43pc. Moreover — and this is important for Rahul Gandhi to note — in her rout, Mrs Gandhi still had 154 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha whereas the Congress in recent outings has struggled to do half as well. And this is what needs to be understood and explained by the struggling behemoth the Congress has become.

The BJP under Modi's leadership is pursuing power at any cost — dismantling state governments with defections in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra, winning elsewhere with questionable methods under the election commission's nose. What then is the most important task before opposition parties? They might want to figure out their priorities at the outset. Should the left, for example, derail Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal or see the back of the BJP first? Similar sacrifices are needed in Kerala to keep the BJP out.

Also, do the opposition really believe they are taking part in a genuine democratic event with elections? Or are today's elections mere choreographed formalities with a predetermined outcome? The complete subjugation of the election commission provides a most visible clue. The opposition had pondered a second independence movement. Should they hit the road as Gandhi would? And like Gandhi, perhaps talk to Pakistan? The most nationalist opposition party can't beat the BJP on its militarist turf. ■

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